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UM lands two prestigious awards for early-career scientists

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NEWS RELEASE

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UM LANDS TWO PRESTIGIOUS AWARDS FOR EARLY-CAREER SCIENTISTS

MONTANA –

The National Science Foundation has given The University of Montana an early Christmas present with the announcement that two of its promising young scientists have earned Early Career Development Program grants.

The prestigious five-year awards went to Creagh Breuner and Vanessa Ezenwa. Both women are assistant professors in UM's Wildlife Biology Program and Division of Biological Sciences.

A handful of UM researchers have earned CAREER grants in the past, but the University has never had two awardees in the same year or academic unit. Each year between 350 and 400 assistant professors nationally earn the awards, which honor promising teacher-scholars who most effectively integrate research and education for their institution.

CAREER grants generally range from \$500,000 to \$1 million. Breuner will receive \$800,000, and Ezenwa will get \$715,000.

"These two are among our most recent hires, and I think they represent the caliber of people we attract here at (UM)," said Dan Pletscher, director of the Wildlife Biology Program.

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“We have amazingly productive faculty, and these two are excellent examples of that.”

“For someone starting out, this means they can get their research program established without interruptions or having to worry about generating a new grant every two or three years,” said Charlie Janson, associate dean of UM’s biology division. “It gives them the freedom to plan for the long-term.”

Breuner, who has worked at UM for a year and a half, studies interactions among unexpected environmental changes, behavior responses to those stressors and the hormonal mechanisms underlying those responses. She focuses on glucocorticoid hormones, which increase in the body when an animal becomes stressed.

She uses captive and wild sparrows in her research. She has studied sparrows breeding just outside Yosemite National Park in the Sierra Nevada since 1997.

“It was really hard to sleep when I first heard about (the award),” Breuner said. “It’s an amazing amount of money to get as a young investigator, and the recognition has been a little crazy. It’s just a fabulous feeling.”

Employed at UM for two and a half years, Ezenwa studies the causes and consequences of variation in parasite infection in wild animal populations. Her project will examine how gazelle behavior in Africa influences parasite transmission. She also will study whether parasites potentially influence the evolution of mating-system variation in these animals. Do parasites drive variation in mating tactics by influencing individual mating decisions, behaviors and mating success?

Ezenwa’s study area is in Kenya, where she did her doctoral research.

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"I'm obviously very happy about (the grant)," Ezenwa said. "Now I will have the money and the timeframe to build up my research program."

Both researchers will involve undergraduate researchers in their work. Breuner intends to recruit four students to assist her for six weeks each spring in California. Ezenwa will take one UM student to Africa with her each year, where that recruit will take a field course and do research projects with undergraduates from Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya.

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